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Australia

Corporate giants censor the internet and control the news

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This morning [17-18 February 2021] was a shocking wake-up call for anyone who cares about free speech on the internet. Facebook—still Australia's most widely used social networking platform—banned Australian users from accessing or sharing any news content at all, while deleting all the content posted by any news outlets (or suspected news outlets). The mainstream media and politicians were caught flat-footed, and have been beating the drum about foreign billionaires who won't pay a fair price for Aussie content. [There has been a partial reversal since, see *The Guardian* 23 February 2021 "Facebook reverses Australia news ban after government makes media code amendments".]

This development is scary, but not because any heroic local media corporations are being bullied by Yankee tech giants. It's a disturbing demonstration of how the commercialisation of the internet can lead to sweeping censorship. And while that dark trend accelerates, Australia's political class isn't worried about defending free speech or democracy—they're only worried about propping up the profit margins of their allies in the corporate media. If we want to defend our right to communicate freely, we'll have to do it ourselves.

For those of us involved in publishing independent media, it was a pretty unpleasant way to be woken up. Red Flag's Facebook page is still its most popular social media account—or it was, until it was disappeared at dawn, along with a swathe of non-profit advocacy groups and information outlets, including the Australian Council of Trade Unions and the Bureau of Meteorology. (Most of the non-profits have been restored, but the independent journalism outfits are still mostly offline, including Red Flag.)

Any Australian Facebook user who tries to post a link to a news story gets an error message, even if you're posting in, say, a private Facebook group devoted to refugee rights activism, and you try posting a news story about a development in an important legal case. So one of the most important, widely used, and universally accessible platforms for political discussion has banned an entire continent from using it to access, distribute or discuss journalism. In this case, it's not because of a political crackdown. It's because of a dispute between two sets of reprehensible corporate behemoths: the tech giants like Google and Facebook, and the vile Australian corporate media, who are used to being cosseted by Australian governments.

Australia's media has been deregulated over and over again in the interest of a few bloated conglomerates, leading to one of the world's most notoriously concentrated, low-quality, and right-wing media landscapes, of which Rupert Murdoch is only the most globally infamous spawn. Here in Australia, we also have to deal with specimens like Kerry Stokes, the billionaire boss of the Channel 7 empire; he's also a big mining and construction-equipment capitalist, and he's recently taken up a side-gig in defending, promoting and hiring alleged child-killing war criminals.

Australia's media barons have spent decades promoting climate denial, racism, and right-wing politics generally, while expecting all of Australia's media regulations to be tailored to their commercial interests—which they mostly are. Now that their own business models are failing, they want the government to force America's equally evil, but arguably more terrifying, tech giants to pay Australian news companies a fee. It's a pretty self-evidently absurd rent-seeking proposal: Australia's media corporations demand access to the social media platforms and Google's search engines, but then insist that the platforms pay them for the privilege of displaying the content.

But Facebook's response—shutting down Australian news completely and with no course of appeal—reveals the terrible reality of the contemporary internet: it's a space more and more dominated by corporate interests, where communication happens only to the extent that it satisfies shareholders and advertisers.

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The early internet had something of the air of an academic conference, partly because most of its users were, indeed, academics. E-mail lists, usenet groups, IRC and other platforms were non-commercial. They weren't designed to display embedded ads based on algorithmic consumer analysis. They were just ways to communicate. But as the profit-generating potential of instantaneous global communication has been mined for decades, the online ecosystem has been transformed. Now the most widely used platforms are dominated by massive corporations, each trying to wall off its own section of the internet and shape the content to its own commercial needs.

The tech giants' recent campaign against "fake news" led a few hypocritical right-wingers to make a legitimate point. After Twitter began censoring articles about Joe Biden's son, Ted Cruz interrogated Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey in a congressional hearing: "Who the hell elected you and put you in charge of what the media are allowed to report and what the American people are allowed to hear?" It's a good question. The social media corporations are unelected and unaccountable except to their capitalist owners. But there's another problem: the mainstream media outlets are equally undemocratic and unaccountable, and so is every other corporation in modern global capitalism. And between them, they now dominate an indispensable communications technology with enormous democratic potential.

As part of its commercial fight in Australia, Facebook has banned the news for now. But before that, it was already restricting the reach of political content, throttling the output of "extremist" publishers, introducing politically biased algorithms, and summarily banning anarchists and socialists—in part, because it was trying to ingratiate itself with the US political establishment. There was no way for users to democratically resist or overturn these decisions. And before social media came along, the traditional media outlets were well known to be corporate propaganda outfits. Some hoped that the development of the internet would disintegrate the corporate control of ideas and information, but the censorious, commercialised nature of today's social media shows that that dream will never come true as long as capitalist decision-making governs the use of the technology.

And in that context, demanding the capitalist state take over the social media outfits isn't enough. After all, Australia's capitalist state has nurtured Murdoch and Stokes, while the US capitalist state is pressuring Facebook to censor radical politics. It's hard to imagine that a version of Facebook run by the US and Australian governments, with the technology supplied by the NSA and ASIO, would be a great improvement on what we have now.

Radicals are going to have to take seriously the challenges of organising to disseminate and discuss information using diverse technological platforms. (And make sure you're subscribed to our print edition and our email list, and follow our Instagram and our Twitter.) But we're also going to have to fight like hell against every act of censorship we face. And we're going to keep facing them, as long as the demands of profit-making, capitalist competition and authoritarian right-wing politics decide who can say what, and who's allowed to hear it.

18 February 2021

*Source **Red Flag**.*